

WHERE THE TORAH DOES DWELL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

So much of Jewish prayer and national aspiration is built on our longing for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, may it come speedily in our days. Especially during the coming weeks, as we study the Torah readings that describe the building of the Tabernacle (the predecessor of the Mikdash) and its vessels, and the clothing of the holy Kohanim, our hearts are especially sensitive to the void created when the Temple was destroyed almost 2,000 years ago.

When we read the verse in this week's parsha (25:8), "And they shall make a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them," our hearts long for the Final Redemption, when, finally, "Hashem will be One and His name will be One. (Zecharia 14:9)"

The Midrash says (Bereishis Rabbah 65:22) that after the Greeks took the Temple Mount, they wanted to enter the Holy Temple and take possession of its precious vessels - but they feared Heavenly retribution. They found a non-affiliated Jew named Yosef Meshita, and bribed him to go in ahead of them, saying he could take whatever he wanted. Yosef Meshita agreed, entered the Sanctuary, and removed the golden Menorah.

The Greeks were taken aback by its beauty. "This Menorah must be given to the King," they said. "Go back in and take something else."

"I shall not," the suddenly serious sinner said. "Is it not enough that I have angered my Creator once - shall I go in a second time as well?!" They tried to reason with him, but he would not re-enter. They threatened him, but he would not budge. It soon became clear that he would either acquiesce, or die: The Greeks built a large wooden table, and began nailing Yosef to it. Instead of backing down, he refused to hand over the Menorah to the heathens, crying out, "Woe is to me, that I have angered my Creator," as his soul departed him.

What happened? Just minutes ago, Yosef was so unmoved by the Holy Temple that he had no qualms over defiling it and misappropriating its vessels for his personal use. Then, suddenly, he becomes inexplicably obstinate, choosing to die rather than to further defile Hashem's name by handing over his loot - even though they would anyways take the Menorah once he died?

What changed, R' Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l explains, is that this non-affiliated Jew spent a moment in the holiest of all places, in the unmasked presence of G-d. Despite his most unpure intentions, that moment was enough to transform him from a sinner to someone who was willing to give up his life for Hashem.

Normally, we associate the Mikdash with the sacrifices that were brought there, and the prayers and song that were recited alongside them. In fact, the Torah plays a far more central role to the Temple's sanctity than many realize.

The Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 33:1) explains the juxtaposition of the coming weeks' Torah readings with the previous weeks', which describe Hashem giving us the Torah and its mitzvos on Mount Sinai.

"I gave you the Torah, and I gave you Myself," G-d says - as it is written, "And you shall take Me as a portion."

A king had an only daughter whom he loved very much. She met a young prince, who asked to marry her, and return to his land. Said the king: "She is my only daughter. To be separated from her - I cannot. To tell you not to take her - I cannot. So I have one request: Wherever your travels take you, build me a small room, so that I can be near to you."

So said Hashem to Israel: "I have given you the Torah. To be separated from it - I cannot. To tell you not to take it - I cannot. I only ask that wherever you go, make Me a small sanctuary that I may dwell among you."

According to this Midrash, the building of the Temple was a direct outcome of Mattan Torah - the giving of Torah at Sinai. It was not motivated by the need for sacrifices, nor in order to create a central house of prayer. This is why the Aron (Holy Ark), which housed the Luchos (tablets of the Ten Commandments), was central to the Temple, and rested in the Holy of Holies. It was the true source of the Temple's sanctity.

This explains why, when the Philistines captured the Ark, the Jewish people were thrown into deep despair, and the prophet Eli and his daughter-in-law died from the shock (Shmuel-I 4:17-18). Its capture is symbolic of the Jews losing hold of the Torah; perhaps they perceived that its defilement could only be the precursor of far worse things to come. It also explains why Torah study may not be interrupted, even to rebuild the Temple. (Mishnas Rebbe Aaron)

When describing the Ark's construction, the Torah specifies that it needed golden carrying rods on either side - which were never to be removed. Why is it so important that the rods remain alongside the Aron at all times - even when the Temple stood in Jerusalem and was not traveling from spot to spot?

The rods were used to elevate the Torah - to carry it. They signify Torah study and toil. Hashem did not give us the Torah to have it sit in a corner collecting dust. At no moment, ever, should the Torah be left unattended to.

It also gives voice to the difference between true Torah study - which has the uncorrupted power to elevate the Jewish soul to the highest levels of refinement and even revelation - and what we sometimes pass off as Torah study. The quality of Torah study required to actualize the promise of,

"and I will dwell among you," is that which is symbolized by the Ark and its staves - uninterrupted toil (and not, with all due respect, reading this short dvar Torah during Friday night prayers). While all learning is admirable, only deep, uninterrupted Torah study has the capacity to elevate our neshamos to the closeness and sanctity we experienced when the Torah was given.

Our longing for the Holy Temple, perhaps, can be somewhat tempered by a firm, unswerving commitment to Torah study. It was Hashem's desire, to the extent we can express it, not to be separated from the Torah that facilitated the mitzvah to build the Temple, through which His presence rested among us. So while we eagerly await the redemption and the rebuilding of the holy Sanctuary, we take comfort in the fact that when we enter our Study Halls - our 'miniature Temples' - and toil in uninterrupted Torah study, we make our own small dwelling place for Hashem among us, and merit all the blessings and miracles that existed when the Temple stood.

Have a good Shabbos.

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